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ABSTRACT

Chief academic officers at 1,053 institutions of higher education across the United States were surveyed about the barriers to improving teaching and learning. Using factor analysis, responses were reduced to nine general problem areas. In order of importance from most important to least important, the problems identified were: financial support, faculty support systems, student limitations, student academic support programs, academic administration, limitations of faculty, academic constraints, academic support systems, and enrollment demographics. Rankings are contrasted among comprehensive, four-year, and two-year institutions, and between public and private institutions. The identified problems had common features in that they concerned resource issues, external constraints, and administrative or governance structures. Academic administrators can address these barriers by such actions as working with other administrators to develop budgets and set institutional priorities, developing cooperative programs to improve the preparation of students before they reach college, and reorganizing ineffective administrative systems. Two references are included. (JDD)

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IMPROVING COLLEGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Administrative Barriers to Improving Undergraduate Education

Changes in student demographics, critical national reports, charges from external agencies, and a general level of frustration among faculty and administrators with student learning have all focused attention on evaluating and revising the undergraduate curriculum. Research completed at NCRIPTAL, however, leads us to question whether we are attacking the right problems.

The responsibility for improving the quality of undergraduate education cannot be placed solely on the shoulders of faculty. The institution as a whole must be committed to excellence and open to change. The administration must support faculty and student activities. Most important, academic management policies and practices must be available and structured to encourage and support teaching, learning, and program improvement.

To learn how academic administrative practices affect undergraduate programs, a team of researchers at NCRIPTAL surveyed chief academic officers at 1,053 institutions across the United States. They asked these administrators about two things: What are the barriers to improving teaching and learning, and what practices improve teaching and learning? We focus here on the barriers; the practices are addressed in a forthcoming **Accent**.

Barriers

Using factor analysis of thirty potential barriers identified by a pilot study of 300 administrators, responses by the 1,053 surveyed academic leaders were reduced to nine general problem areas. In order of importance from most important to least important, the problems identified were:

1. **Financial Support**
   - Inadequate capital funds
   - Inadequate operating funds for educational improvement
2. **Faculty Support Systems**
   - Inadequate incentives and rewards for teaching and improvement
   - Inadequate faculty development programs
   - Inadequate faculty and administrator recruitment
3. **Student Limitations**
   - Inadequate student preparation
   - Poor student attitudes about learning
   - Student-faculty value gap

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4. **Student Academic Support Programs**
   - Inadequate student academic support programs

5. **Academic Administration**
   - Inadequate evaluation of and rewards for teaching
   - Inadequate student assessment
   - Ineffective planning or resource allocation
   - Inadequate academic leadership
   - Curriculum problems
   - Ineffective academic governance process

6. **Limitations of Faculty**
   - Narrow faculty specialization
   - Faculty or departmental resistance to change
   - Tenured or aging faculty
   - Poor quality teaching
   - Low faculty commitment to teaching
   - Low faculty morale

7. **Academic Constraints**
   - Collective bargaining and unionization
   - State-level constraints
   - Heavy teaching loads

8. **Academic Support Systems**
   - Inadequate study space
   - Dependence on part-time faculty or TA's
   - Restrictive accreditation requirements
   - Inadequate library and acquisitions

9. **Enrollment Demographics**
   - Declining enrollments
   - Changing student demographics

Institutional Differences

Concerns about financial support ranked higher than all other concerns for comprehensive, four-year, and two-year institutions, and academic administrators at all three types of institutions appeared to be equally concerned about this issue. In seven of the remaining eight problem areas (excepting academic support systems), administrators at community colleges expressed more concern about these issues than did administrators at comprehensive and four-year institutions.

Four-year institutions gave the lowest ranking of the three groups to most of the problem areas. Comprehensive institutions were the most concerned about academic support systems and the least concerned about enrollment demographics.

When comparing public and private institutions, the highest-ranked problem is still financial support. The level of concern about enrollment demographics, surprisingly, is outweighed by most of the other problem areas identified and is similar at public and private institutions. In all other problem areas, public institutions gave higher rankings to the problem areas than did private institutions.

Common Themes

In general, the identified problems, which were shared by all institutions, had some common features: Many were related to resource issues, some addressed external constraints, and others referred to administrative or governance structures — many overlap.

The most common concern, resource issues, includes budget, facilities, materials, and personnel. The two problems cited most often as barriers to improving academic programs were the lack of discretionary funds for programmatic change (Factor 1: Financial Support) and inadequacy of programs supporting faculty (Factor 2: Faculty Support Systems). Inadequate study space, dependence on part-time faculty or teaching assistants, and inadequate library and acquisitions (Factor 8: Academic Support Systems) are also the results of resource limitations, as are inadequate student academic support programs (Factor 4).

External constraints are evident in enrollment demographics (Factor 9) and student limitations (Factor 3) as well as in restrictive accreditation requirements (Factor 8: Academic Support Systems). Other external constraints are caused by the institution itself. Heavy teaching loads are seen as constraints imposed by the administration on faculty, and collective bargaining and unionization are seen as constraints on the administration, while state-level constraints affect both faculty and the administration (Factor 7: Academic Constraints).

Administrative or governance structures manifest themselves as problems in the areas of planning,

curricular inflexibility, evaluation, assessment, and resource allocation (Factor 5: Academic Administration) as well as in faculty specialization, resistance to change, and tenure (Factor 6: Limitations of Faculty). The inadequacy of programs supporting faculty (Factor 3: Faculty Support Systems) may also be a structural issue related to institutional priorities. What is not known is whether these structures are preferred or whether they are caused, or at least exacerbated, by the lack of adequate resources to address these issues differently.

Turning Problems Into Solutions

The problems listed as a result of this study are drawn from the observations of academic administrators. They represent only one perspective and do not include that of the governing board, the president, other administrators, or, most significantly, the faculty. They are, however, the views of those most immediately responsible for overseeing academic programs, and they seem to provide a guide for how academic administrators can address curricular problems.

To overcome these barriers, resource issues need to be addressed. Academic administrators need to be involved in obtaining additional resources for academic programs. They also need to be active partners with other administrators in developing budgets and setting institutional priorities.

Attempts to manage external constraints also need to be made. Poor preparation of students does not have to be accepted as inevitable. Academic leaders in higher education are in a position to develop cooperative programs to improve the preparation of students before they reach college. They are also in a position to develop programs that address new markets in lieu of the declining number of high school students.

Barriers related to administrative structures must also be addressed. Time needs to be spent reorganizing ineffective administrative systems—a project that is extremely time-consuming and requires finely honed consensus-building skills. Efforts must also be made to change faculty so that their limitations will not inhibit the academic program. Although difficult, there are many aspects of this issue that can be addressed. It may also be that addressing the resource, structure, and external constraint issues may have the effect of changing faculty morale and commitment—important components of changing faculty behavior, as we are finding in a related study.

Further research on these issues is currently being undertaken by NCRIPTAL. Case studies of specific institutions clarify how the institution can support academic change. We need not wait for these results, however, before taking action. Using what has already been learned, it seems clear that we must accurately identify the barriers within the institution that stand in the way of more effective teaching and learning. Then, we must address the problems themselves. If we are revising the curriculum when the real problems are finances, external forces, and unwieldy administrative systems, the possibility of improving teaching and learning may be minimal at best. If, however, we attack the barriers themselves, we could improve the possibility of improving student outcomes.

— Michele Genthon

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This Accent is based on the research of Marvin W. Peterson and the staff of NCRIPTAL's research program, Organizational Context for Teaching and Learning.

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